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# REPORT ON COMESA VISIT TO SWEDEN FOR SDEP

*PREPARED FOR THE WORLD BANK AND OTHER  
DEVELOPMENT FUNDING INSTITUTIONS*

CREATED BY

EUSL AB

*Care to Change the World*

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## 1. Executive Summary

This memorandum provides a formal summary of the recent strategic field mission undertaken by the European Social Label (EUSL), and affiliated partners within the framework of the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP) and its related components. The purpose of the visit to Sweden was to operate the next phase of programme development, consolidate partner engagement, and refine the institutional architecture required for regional scale-up, including the proposed ACTESA mandate update and the long-term ACTESA Power Play framework.

The mission, which included engagements across Sweden and with COMESA-affiliated institutions, resulted in substantial alignment between institutional actors on the structuring of a cohesive programme pipeline. This includes updated costing, which now place the combined value of priority initiatives at USD 374 million, covering agriculture, health, energy, and enabling infrastructure, to be deployed under a harmonized implementation logic.

Notably, since the AfDB held conference in Nairobi in March 2025, the programme has exceeded initial strategic expectations. At that time, the operational goal was to formally engage one country, with an aspirational target of securing commitments from three countries. As of this writing, the programme has achieved formal expressions of interest and alignment from eight countries, resulting in a revised aggregate funding request of USD 374 million, up from an initial projection of USD 100 million. This development reflects a rapid acceleration in regional demand and validation of the SDEP framework as a credible and timely vehicle for integrated development.

The trip confirmed a number of critical strategic outcomes:

- **Reclassification of SDEP** as an *agriculture-first programme*, to be coordinated by ACTESA under COMESA's political and technical mandate.
- **Deployment of ECHO** as a modular infrastructure and logistics backbone, enabling last-mile delivery and traceability.
- **Integration of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF)** as a monitoring and compliance mechanism aligned with both World Bank and AfDB policy instruments.
- **Affirmation of the ACTESA Power Play**, a 50-year programme-based financing model, positioned to catalyze strategic investments with a funding value of up to USD 300 billion over time.
- **Institutional support for mandate development**, particularly the proposed evolution of ACTESA from a coordination entity to an implementation partner, aligned with future Development Finance Institutions (DFI) engagement mechanisms.

The work aligns strongly with Agenda 2063, the COMESA Medium-Term Strategic Plan, and the broader ambitions of DFI's climate, agriculture, and human capital investment priorities across sub-Saharan Africa. The upcoming Memorandum of Understanding with ACTESA (2026) will serve to institutionalize this trajectory and enable formal submission to international financing bodies, including the World Bank and the African Development Bank.

This summary is submitted for consideration by the World Bank, with the intent to facilitate strategic alignment and ensure appropriate integration into forthcoming regional and country-level programming discussions alongside already established AfDB.

## 2. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the mission was to formally anchor the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP), the proposed ACTESA mandate update, and the long-term ACTESA Power Play within ACTESA's institutional framework, and to do so in a manner consistent with COMESA's development agenda and Agenda 2063 implementation mechanisms.

The European Social Label (EUSL), acting as the technical and strategic initiator of the programme, led the mission to:

- **Secure ACTESA's institutional commitment** to assume coordination responsibility for SDEP as a COMESA flagship programme in agriculture, and to initiate the formal process of updating ACTESA's mandate to include structured implementation, regional financial interfacing, and hosting responsibilities for the SDEP-INFF pipeline.
- **Introduce and contextualize the ACTESA Power Play**, a programme-based financial architecture with a projected funding value of up to USD 300 billion over 50 years, designed to support long-term agricultural transformation, logistics integration, and trade facilitation across COMESA member states.
- **Enable ACTESA's direct engagement with core institutional and technical partners** through a curated series of high-level meetings, site visits, and stakeholder dialogues. These included:
  - A technical and strategic visit to the ECHO production facility in Finland, showcasing the modular infrastructure platform that underpins the logistical and digital backbone of SDEP.
  - Bilateral meetings with the Executive Director Offices of the African Development Bank (AfDB) in both Sweden and Finland, aimed at fostering alignment and preparing the ground for AfDB's structural participation in the programme.
  - A formal briefing with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to explore complementary development instruments and confirm mutual interest in agricultural systems transformation in Africa.
  - Consultations with private banking representatives and structured finance actors regarding de-risking strategies, blended finance, and long-term funding instruments suited to programme deployment.
  - A strategic dialogue at Uppsala University concerning the EFFORT initiative, with particular emphasis on integrating the CEHA (Climate-Education-Health-Agriculture) and COMBIHAP (Community-Based Integrated Health and Agriculture Programme) sub-pillars into the broader SDEP delivery model. EFFORT was confirmed as a credible project framework for coordinating research, capacity building, and long-term system impact.
  - Bilateral engagements with UNDP and FAO, both of whom formally recognized the strategic relevance of SDEP and ACTESA's central role. These discussions confirmed their willingness to provide ongoing support for both technical and policy-level integration within regional and national frameworks.

Through this mission, EUSL successfully facilitated direct institutional engagement, positioned ACTESA as the central coordinating body for implementation, and laid the groundwork for a multi-actor, multi-instrument deployment strategy. The scope of the mission was strictly programmatic and institutional, focused on actionable outcomes and alignment with credible delivery mechanisms.

### 3. Institutional Engagements and Strategic Outcomes

The strategic visit to Sweden and Finland enabled a dense sequence of engagements that proved instrumental in elevating SDEP and the ACTESA Power Play from vision to viable institutional trajectory. At the heart of each meeting was a clear and coordinated message: COMESA, through ACTESA, stands ready to lead regional agricultural transformation, with the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP) as its flagship — and the ACTESA Power Play as its financial and operational engine.

What began as a programme seeking endorsement evolved, during the course of the week, into a regionally owned platform actively being shaped by ministries, development partners, financial actors, and academic institutions. The mission confirmed not only broad support for the programme's objectives, but also an unprecedented level of institutional readiness to execute.

#### 3.1 ACTESA: Mandate Reaffirmed, Ownership Strengthened

The most pivotal outcome of the week was the full institutional alignment between EUSL and ACTESA. What was once an implementer-to-coordinator relationship has now been transformed into a shared mandate: a joint platform where EUSL brings strategic design and systems integration, while ACTESA anchors regional legitimacy, intergovernmental access, and coordination.

ACTESA reaffirmed its intention to initiate a mandate update during 2026 — a step widely supported by other partners. This evolution will allow ACTESA to act not only as a policy and coordination body, but also as a structured implementation and financing interface under the COMESA umbrella.

The Power Play, which had previously been discussed in abstract terms, was during this visit adopted as a concrete and time-bound commitment by ACTESA. Framed as a 50-year regional mechanism for structured investment and delivery, it will consolidate existing pipelines, such as SDEP, CEHA and COMBIHAP, while remaining open to additional programmes aligned with COMESA's agricultural strategy.

#### 3.2 DVGuilford: Private Sector Confidence and Continuity

Mr. Albert Yuen, representing DVGuilford, met with the delegation upon his arrival in Sweden and received a comprehensive briefing on the updated SDEP structure, the proposed INFF architecture, and the ACTESA Power Play.

Mr. Yuen reiterated DVGuilford's full support for the programme and confirmed that all previously signed agreements and support letters remain valid and in force. Importantly, he welcomed the refinement of the Power Play as a structured, institutionally led mechanism with clear targets — moving beyond isolated funding opportunities to a scalable, investment-ready platform.

He expressed confidence in DVGuilford's ability to support strategic mobilization of private capital, including within the scope of a 50-year financial horizon of up to USD 300 billion. The clarity of governance (via INFF) and traceability (via EFFORT) were noted as key enablers of investor trust.

### 3.3 EFFORT / Uppsala University: Governance through Quantification

A key dimension of programme maturity was established during discussions with Professor Rafael Waters from Uppsala University's EFFORT team. Through this meeting, the parties confirmed the integration of the EFFORT framework as a project methodology underpinning all programme sub-pillars — including CEHA and COMBIHAP.

EFFORT was recognized as a bridge between implementation and academic validation. It will not absorb SDEP, but will support it through robust monitoring, transparency, and replication methodologies. Its predictive risk management capacity and real-time tenant-based dashboards make it a natural partner to the INFF and provide added security to funders and ministries alike.

A formal letter of support from Uppsala University is underway.

### 3.4 UNDP and FAO: Multilateral Legitimacy Consolidated

Engagements with UNDP (Thangavel Palanivel, Uganda) and FAO South Sudan further bolstered multilateral alignment.

Although connectivity issues prevented a live meeting with UNDP, Mr. Palanivel submitted a formal letter of support post-event, explicitly endorsing the implementation of a COMESA-wide INFF framework and SDEP as its leading programme. UNDP also affirmed its interest in aligning this work with national policy delivery in Uganda.

FAO South Sudan participated in-person, alongside the South Sudanese Ministry of Agriculture. Despite South Sudan not being a COMESA member, its membership in EAC and participation in the CEHA framework formed a legitimate entry point. FAO expressed full support for SDEP and the COMESA-wide INFF. South Sudan's representatives also conveyed strong political will, including a direct expression from the royal household, to be included in the programme.

### 3.5 AfDB Executive Director Office – Finland: Institutional Entry Point Activated

Perhaps most significantly, the visit culminated in a formal meeting with the Executive Director's Office of the African Development Bank (AfDB) in Finland. During the meeting, both SDEP and the ACTESA Power Play were positively received, with the concept of a manufacturing hub and vocational centre in Kotka, Finland generating particular enthusiasm.

The AfDB ED Office committed to preparing a letter of support for SDEP, INFF, and the ECHO Factory initiative. Moreover, the Finnish representation offered to open doors to relevant national institutions, such as Finn Fund and other climate-aligned financing channels.

This interaction marked a turning point in AfDB engagement — moving from passive awareness to active entry through its Nordic ownership base. A similar engagement with the Swedish ED Office is pending, but well underway.

## 4. Programme Refinements and Updated Financial Scope

The structural logic and operational ambition of the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP) have evolved significantly since its early design stages. What began as a focused programme initiative within the COMESA region has, through institutional validation and growing demand, matured into a modular and scalable delivery framework with the capacity to serve multiple Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including EAC, ECCAS, and SADC.

This geographic expansion has been accompanied by an increase in funding demand. As of June 2025, the aggregated expressions of interest and preliminary costing projections across participating countries place the updated financial scope of the programme at approximately USD 374 million. This figure is grounded in identifiable sub-programmes, budgeted deliverables, and implementation-ready components, making it both credible and actionable in institutional contexts.

### **Anchoring Transparency and Accountability through INFF and EFFORT**

The refinement of SDEP has not only been quantitative in nature. The core value proposition of the programme now rests in its institutional delivery model — specifically its integration with two critical governance mechanisms:

- The Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF), which provides financial alignment, traceability, and policy coherence at both national and regional levels.
- The EFFORT framework, which offers a replicable methodology for tracking impact, assessing risk, and ensuring accountability throughout the project lifecycle.

EFFORT is now positioned as the default structuring tool for programme execution. It enables clear definition of:

- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs),
- Outcome pathways,
- Transparent reporting to all stakeholders,
- and academic and third-party validation where applicable.

While not every programme will be identical in scope or content, initiatives such as CEHA and COMBIHAP have emerged as leading examples of how EFFORT can be applied to ensure visibility, predictability, and replicability across regions.

### **From Regional Focus to Continental Platform**

Although SDEP was initially conceived within the COMESA context, its design has proven both regionally adaptable and institutionally transferrable. As a result, discussions are now underway to establish SDEP-like programme lines in countries belonging to other RECs, supported by a unified INFF structure and coordinated through ACTESA's evolving role.

The expanded financial scope reflects not only the increased geographic demand, but also the strategic intention to position SDEP and its associated components as continentally relevant models, backed by institutional safeguards and public-private financing structures that meet global development finance standards.

Crucially, with INFF as the financial and policy engine, and EFFORT as the monitoring and performance mechanism, investors and institutional partners now have full insight into programme evolution, execution, and outcomes — a level of visibility rarely available at this stage of programme consolidation.

## 5. ACTESA Power Play and Institutional Mandate Update

A central outcome of the mission was the consolidated and cross-institutional support for the ACTESA Power Play — a strategic programme architecture designed to operationalize ACTESA's coordination mandate into full-scale implementation authority. The Power Play serves as a long-term, programmatic framework with a funding value of up to USD 300 billion over a 50-year horizon, enabling COMESA member states to pursue agricultural transformation through coordinated infrastructure, logistics, digitalization, vocational capacity, and inclusive finance.

### Power Play: From Vision to Institutional Mechanism

Initially developed as a conceptual bridge between public-sector objectives and private-sector capacity, the ACTESA Power Play has now achieved a level of institutional maturity. During the mission, all participating actors — including ACTESA leadership, AfDB Executive Directors, SIDA, academic institutions, and private finance stakeholders — expressed support for the Power Play as a necessary and timely mechanism to anchor long-term financing into a credible institutional pipeline.

Rather than a singular fund or transaction, the Power Play represents a programme-of-programmes, within which SDEP, CEHA, COMBIHAP, and related regional initiatives can be hosted, financed, and governed. It offers a platform for:

- National and regional programme registration and alignment.
- Blended finance and donor harmonization.
- Structured engagement with institutional investors.
- Integrated planning under the INFF (Integrated National Financing Framework) model.

### Institutional Mandate Update: ACTESA's Evolution

To enable ACTESA to host and implement the Power Play, stakeholders affirmed the need to formally update ACTESA's mandate. The updated mandate, currently being reviewed in consultation with the COMESA Secretariat, would:

- Elevate ACTESA's institutional function beyond coordination, granting it structured implementation authority.
- Allow ACTESA to act as a host institution for INFF-based programme pipelines, with fiduciary and governance mechanisms aligned to regional and national priorities.
- Create a regional interface with external finance institutions (including AfDB, the World Bank and other DFI's as well as private capital) to enable direct programme financing, reporting, and oversight.

This evolution is both logical and necessary, given ACTESA's original mandate to facilitate trade and agricultural development across COMESA. The mandate update will not replace existing coordination functions, but rather enhance them with operational capacity and long-term accountability instruments.

All actors involved in the mission recognized that the institutional maturity of ACTESA is key to the credibility and scalability of the Power Play. The decision to pursue a mandate update is therefore not an abstract administrative reform, but a strategic move to unlock implementation and funding across the region.



## 6. INFF Integration and Financing Architecture

The integration of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) as the structuring mechanism for the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP) and the ACTESA Power Play represents a critical evolution in aligning regional programme delivery with international financing architecture. The INFF, as endorsed by the United Nations and promoted by the African Union Commission, provides a structured methodology to align policy, planning, and financing across national and regional actors. Its adoption by ACTESA and COMESA significantly enhances the credibility and bankability of the proposed interventions.

### INFF as a Governance Backbone for SDEP and the Power Play

The INFF framework is now being institutionalized as the financial and operational backbone for both SDEP and the ACTESA Power Play. Its main structural advantages include:

- **National Alignment:** INFF ensures programme integration with National Development Plans (NDPs) and country-level budgetary cycles, which is essential for host country ownership and donor coordination.
- **Multi-Source Finance Integration:** The framework supports blended and pooled finance structures, accommodating Official Development Assistance (ODA), philanthropic capital, sovereign financing, and institutional investment under one coherent architecture.
- **Transparency and Measurability:** The INFF provides clear performance indicators and reporting lines, enhancing oversight and reducing fiduciary risk.
- **Regional Coherence:** Through the INFF, ACTESA can coordinate financial programming across multiple COMESA countries, harmonizing efforts and reducing duplication of initiatives.

### AfDB Engagement and Executive-Level Anchoring

A notable institutional milestone was the formal anchoring of support from the African Development Bank's Executive Director Office in Finland, with continued dialogue ongoing with the counterpart office in Sweden. This executive-level support signals AfDB's receptivity to both the INFF model and to ACTESA's evolving implementation mandate. In addition to lending legitimacy, it opens the path for structured engagement with AfDB's sovereign and non-sovereign financing windows — particularly in light of their emerging climate-smart food production facility, which shares several touchpoints with the SDEP programme.

### EFFORT: A Complementary Project Framework

The EFFORT project framework, developed in partnership with Uppsala University and STUNS, has now been embedded as a parallel monitoring and academic validation layer to the INFF architecture. While the INFF governs macro-level alignment and financial strategy, EFFORT provides granular project tracking and academic anchoring.

Key benefits of EFFORT include:

- **Real-Time Monitoring:** EFFORT provides disaggregated, tenant-based monitoring for each participating country and thematic focus area.
- **Academic Oversight:** Regular reviews by academic institutions strengthen legitimacy and intellectual integrity in both design and outcome reporting.

- **Predictive Risk Management:** Built-in predictive tools allow early detection of risks and underperformance, increasing responsiveness and investor confidence.
- **Replicability and Standardisation:** The modular structure allows for scaling across additional countries and sectors with minimal adjustments.

Together, the INFF and EFFORT frameworks create a complementary, interlocking governance and financing ecosystem, increasing the investment-readiness of SDEP and ACTESA Power Play while ensuring that both internal and external stakeholders can track, validate, and replicate successful implementation practices.

This layered, compliant architecture has positioned ACTESA as a first-mover among African regional economic communities in deploying an INFF-compatible financing model with embedded transparency and traceability — a factor that has significantly increased both institutional interest and potential investment volumes.

## 7. Exploring Strategic Engagement with the World Bank and the MasterCard Foundation

As the Social Development and Empowering Programme (SDEP) reaches a more mature institutional stage, the need to expand partnerships and explore complementary channels of support has become a natural next step. In this context, the European Social Label (EUSL), in coordination with ACTESA and COMESA, wishes to formally explore the potential for collaboration with the World Bank and, by potential extension, the MasterCard Foundation, as part of a multi-institutional partnership ecosystem.

This outreach builds upon prior informal and very brief conversation with representative from the World Bank during the high level meeting in Nairobi, which indicated that a future engagement could be considered.

As of June 2025:

- SDEP has expanded from a concept involving one to three countries into an operational framework with eight participating or formally requesting countries, all operating under COMESA coordination and aligned with ACTESA's forthcoming implementation mandate.
- The programme includes a well-defined and traceable education and vocational training portfolio, with committed components exceeding USD 50 million, across youth training, digital literacy, local employment pathways, and vocational infrastructure.

### Proposed Areas for Dialogue and Collaborative Exploration

We now welcome an open, exploratory dialogue with the World Bank to examine the potential for strategic cooperation, particularly in the following areas:

- **Thematic alignment** around food system transformation, agricultural financing, education, and digital inclusion — core focus areas for both the World Bank and MasterCard Foundation.
- **Parallel or complementary funding pathways**, whether through technical assistance, catalytic grant co-financing, or results-based educational investment instruments.
- **Use of the INFF framework**, now anchored within COMESA, as a transparent and institutionally credible financing mechanism capable of aligning World Bank-financed national operations with regionally coordinated implementation.

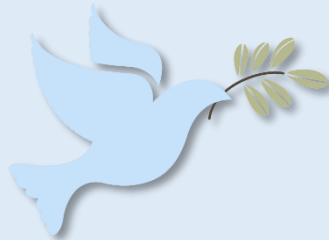
- **Knowledge and learning partnership**, potentially coordinated through the EFFORT academic platform and the FlexSus 2.0 monitoring system, to support shared learning, validation, and replication.

#### **A Logical Extension to an AfDB-Anchored Framework**

Given the African Development Bank's already confirmed interest — through its Executive Director's Office in Finland — and the existing coordination underway within the INFF structure, we believe this creates an ideal environment for the World Bank to explore complementary or collaborative engagement, rather than parallelism.

Furthermore, we understand that the MasterCard Foundation may be open to introductions or collaboration pathways, once the institutional depth and scale criteria are in place — both of which are now satisfied within the SDEP architecture.

This outreach is therefore not a claim of existing engagement, but a formal invitation to consider structured dialogue, supported by a shared commitment to long-term, systems-based change.



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